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U.S. knew of Syria link to '83 embassy blast

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By JIM MCGEE
Herald Staff Writer

U.S. officials have known for three years that five Syrian-backed terrorists confessed to the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut.

One of the terrorists died in a Beirut jail cell several days after he gave CIA officers a tape-recorded confession that implicated Syria.

The other four suspects, whose confessions described in detail how the bombing was carried out, were never prosecuted for the terrorist attack, which killed 63 people.

U.S. officials have never publicly disclosed the results of the embassy bombing investigation, which led to the quiet firing of a CIA officer who beat the suspects and tortured them with an electrical shock device.

The key suspect who died of unknown causes after the questioning had admitted that he was the paymaster for the operation. He said he had arranged safe passage for a Syrian intelligence officer who supervised the wiring of a truck loaded with plastic explosives that detonated the explosion.

"It's very interesting that he was the one who died, because he knew the most," said Robert Dillon, former U.S. ambassador in Lebanon, who survived the blast. "It's like a John D. MacDonald [novel]."

Another suspect was a low level Palestinian employee at the embassy. He said he was assigned to stand near the embassy entrance and signal that Dillon was in the embassy so the attack could begin.

"He [the employee] survived because he ran out the back door," Dillon said.

A third suspect said he helped unload the explosives and participated in the wiring of the truck the night before the bombing. He said a parking lot near his home was used as a staging area.

The confessions were consistent with other information obtained by authorities, sources said. U.S. officials were able to corroborate the presence of the Syrian intelligence officer and the movement of the explosives through Syria.

The CIA declined to comment.

"The agency didn't have anything to say during that time frame and I can't comment now," said CIA spokeswoman Sharon Foster.

CIA officer fired

Foster also declined to discuss the internal scandal that led to the firing of CIA officer Keith D. Hall,

who was sent to Lebanon to investigate the bombing. Hall said his prior employment with the CIA barred him from commenting.

"I've been fired for what I did over there," he said. "I'm not about to get myself in more trouble by violating my secrecy agreement."

Sources familiar with the bombing investigation say there was convincing evidence, in addition to the confessions, that Syria orchestrated the attack, provided technical expertise and assisted in the movement of explosives from Damascus into Beirut.

The charge d'affaires at the Syrian Embassy in Washington, Bushra Kanafani, denied the allegations.

"We had nothing to do with the explosion," she said. "I consider the statements by those who were captured and interrogated were not true, faked, taken under torture, to serve political ends of the Lebanese interrogators at that time."

Sources familiar with the investigation gave this account:

The night before the attack, the terrorists packed a truck with plastic explosives. Metal boxes were welded to the underside of the truck so it could carry more explosives. A small party was held for the driver of the truck who was to die in the explosion.

A routine day

April 18, 1983, was a routine day at the embassy. CIA employees working at the embassy had gathered for a briefing with a visiting VIP from headquarters, senior analyst Robert Ames.

Shortly after lunch, Dillon donned his jogging clothes and got ready for his daily workout. His chauffeur and car were waiting directly in front of the embassy.

Near the front entrance, the Palestinian employee involved in the bombing signaled to a co-conspirator on the street. Several blocks away, the bomb truck began rolling toward the embassy.

It moved slowly down a side street as it approached the embassy. A security officer from another

embassy noticed the truck as it approached. He thought it looked suspicious.

Reaching the front of the embassy, the truck stopped directly behind the ambassador's car. Several blocks away, others involved in the plot stood ready with a radio-controlled detonator.

At 1:05 p.m. someone hit the switch.

A thundering explosion tore through the building. Walls collapsed. Some embassy employees and visitors were killed instantly. Others were crushed by falling walls. In his office, Dillon was knocked to the floor. He was shaken, but uninjured.

Ames, the visiting CIA analyst, and six other intelligence agents were killed. In all, 63 people died, including 17 Americans.

Relied on Lebanese

From the beginning of the investigation, U.S. officials relied on Lebanese authorities who displayed a marked reluctance to pursue higher-ups in the conspiracy, according to Dillon.

"I don't think there was a real 'investigation,'" said Dillon, who is now attached to a United Nations relief agency in Vienna. "It was mainly cooperating with the Lebanese."

"My understanding is the police concentrated on the mechanics [of the bombing] rather than the overall conspiracy," he said. "... It's a dangerous business, even for the police."

Initially, there was some reasonably sophisticated investigation. FBI agents examined physical evidence and bomb debris. Navy divers searched the bay behind the embassy for other evidence.

In a massive roundup of suspects, Lebanese police detained four men who ultimately admitted their involvement.

"As a result of the interrogation of these four people by Lebanese authorities ... investigators were able to put together a great deal of information about the tactical

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carrying out of the attack as it occurred," Dillon said.

Suspects tortured?

One of those arrested was the Palestinian embassy employee. He admitted giving the signal that started the attack.

In addition to the beatings by CIA officer Hall, the suspects were almost certainly tortured by the Lebanese, sources said.

"Interrogation in that part of the world is a brutal business," Dillon said.

The other suspects admitted helping unload explosives at a staging area approximately a mile and a half from the embassy. They also described the party the night before to honor the driver of the suicide mission.

The questioning of these four suspects and other evidence eventually led CIA agents to the fifth conspirator, a wealthy and politically powerful member of the Christian Phalange, a political front.

He admitted recruiting the other conspirators from various factions and escorting a Syrian intelligence officer through Christian Phalange lines. He also admitted being present during the wiring of the truck and at the detonation the next day.

Dillon said he was aware of this fifth suspect but was never told the substance of his confession. He said the method of recruitment was consistent with how terrorist groups operate in Beirut.

"In a place like Lebanon, one group might well recruit a man from another group for a job like this," Dillon said.

It was this fifth and most important suspect who was later found dead in his cell.

Just 'faded away'

There has never been a full disclosure of the findings of the U.S. investigation, although various press accounts have alluded to Syrian involvement.

"It just kind of faded away," said State Department spokesman Michael Kraft.

A New York Times account in April quoted unnamed Lebanese police sources as saying a group of Palestinians and Lebanese carried out the embassy bombing with the backing of Syria or a Palestinian group.

In a recent speech, CIA Director William Casey said Syria, along with Libya and Iran, "hire and support established terrorist organizations ... and make their officials, their embassies, their diplomatic pouches, their communications channels and their terri-

tories as safe haven."

Despite the confessions, there have been no prosecutions.

"I don't know what happened to them subsequently," Dillon said, adding that he would likely have heard about any prosecutions.

"You need court evidence to be able to point out the source who can be held responsible for such an act," said George Slam, a Lebanese diplomatic spokesman. "I don't

know of any case that the security authorities have been able to get that evidence."

The fate of Hall

The CIA fired Hall because he beat and tortured the key suspects, sources said. Hall lived briefly in Miami after his firing and asked U.S. Rep. Dante Fascell to appeal the dismissal.

In letters to President Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz, Hall said he was fired for "overly harsh acts against known terrorists implicated in destroying our Beirut Embassy."

He added: "The information I obtained while in Beirut was later proved 'valid' by a subsequent investigative team with polygraph capability."

Fascell forwarded Hall's letter to CIA chief Casey and got a terse reply defending the firing. An inspector general's investigation found that "sufficient grounds existed for discharging Mr. Hall," Casey wrote.

Subsequently, Hall applied for a job as a Metro-Dade police officer. His application said he was honorably discharged from the Marines with the rank of captain, holds a

master's degree in history and was a police officer for six years. The CIA hired Hall in 1980 as an operations officer and gave him a top-secret clearance.

Asked on the Metro-Dade application if he had any enemies, Hall wrote: "CIA — slandering my name for attempting to get congressional action on their incompetence."

Hall was not offered a position on the police force.

Did he torture the bombing suspects?

"I was doing what I thought was needed in the defense of my country to combat terrorism," he said. "I'll be more than happy to explain everything that went on in Beirut in front of the Senate Intelligence Committee."

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